CHAPTER THREE
THE NOUNS OF GE'EZ

"As for those stones which were drawn out of the deep, they put them all into the building; for they were polished, and their squares exactly answered one another." - SHEPHERD OF HERMAS, Vision III.27. Wake & Lardner edition, undated.

The building blocks of language cannot be considered in isolation, as they exactly answer one another to make the building, but some brief remarks on nouns are not out of place. Those familiar with another Semitic language will not be surprised at the SEMITIC nature of Ge'ez nouns: there are two GENDERS, masculine and feminine, and the feminine form of a masculine word often ends in T:

ንጉሥ፡ ንግሥት፡

For instance, the word negOsh, king, produces negesht, queen.*

In the feminine singular, -at is also a common ending:

helqat ring

Unlike as in Arabic, this T is not usually lost in oblique forms of the noun.

In the older forms of the Semitic languages, and still in Classical Arabic, there is still a system of cases:

nominative for the subject of a sentence;

accusative for the object of a sentence;

genitive for the possessive form.

Anciently, the nominative ended in -u. In Arabic there was often a thing called nunation, with an -n added to the end of words in the nominative case, to show an indefinite meaning, "a,an". In South Arabian there's a bit of this left, as in:

SH.N.'.M (shaani'um) "an enemy"

GE'EZ quite sensibly gives up the use of nunation, and of the -u in front of it, so that there is no formal indication of the nominative case.

The old accusative ending was -a. This is still there in GE'EZ, because it's a useful device to show who or what suffered the result of the action:

qatala negOsha he killed the king (acc.)

* ሠ *was pronounced like English SH in Ge'ez, it seems.*

@@@
@@@

Anciently, the genitive ending was -i. Students of Classical Arabic can still enjoy using this, but GE'EZ like Hebrew now does without it.

However, if you want to make a POSSESSIVE CONSTRUCTION you have to alter the first noun in the group. Consider:

gabra negûsh — the king's servant/slave

We get away without putting an -i on the end of **negûsh**, but the first word has to be expressed with shorter vowels and, often, an -a on the end. This special form of the noun for putting as the first word of a possessive construction is called the CONSTRUCT form. Students of Hebrew will greet it with a groan of recognition, except that Hebrew doesn't use the -a.

It will be noted that -a occurs for both accusative and construct.

Some nouns indicating persons end in -î. We are quite used to using this for nationalities in the Islamic world: Pakistani, Iraqi, Azerbaijani, and so on. When we come to make the accusative and construct forms, the -î is changed to an -ê:

kashshâtî — the revealer

(Notice that in this word the **sh**, ሠ is doubled, although you can't show it in the script.)

kashshâtê berhân — the Revealer of the Light

When we come to the plural of nouns, a Semiticist gets few surprises. Masculine nouns often end in **-ân**, with **-âna** in the construct:

tabîbân — the wise (men)

Feminine nouns typically have **-ât**, with **-âta** in the construct:

'âmat (ዓመት:) — year;

'âmatât (ዓመታት፡) — years

With an adjective treated as a noun, we can see the four forms easily according to a regular pattern:

kebûr — honoured one (masc. singular)

kebûrân — honoured ones (masc.)

kebert — honoured one (feminine sing.)

kebûrât — honoured ones (fem.)

@@@

CHAPTER FIVE
THE ETHIOPIC VERB

In the older Semitic practice of writing consonants only the VERB very often appears as a three-letter word: a TRILITERAL ROOT. The frame of consonants remains the same: variations are had by varying the vowels between them, by adding prefixes and suffixes and so on.

In the very fragmentary texts edited in G.R.Driver, **Canaanite Myths and Legends**, Edinburgh, 1974, we can get some practice in the game of "Spot-the-verb" just using the three consonants. For instance, **XM8**, that is, **sh+m+ghain** (Ethiopic ዐ), we can see the familiar frame for "hear", Hebrew

שמע ← (WRITTEN RIGHT TO LEFT)

as in the name SAMUEL.

The paradigms of the Semitic verb will be had from the frame of 3 consonants (sometimes more, sometimes less) by changing the

vowels in between them, and/or by adding suffixes or prefixes, or by doubling the consonant if it's possible to do so.

Ask anyone who has studied the verbs in Hebrew or Arabic and they will say, "I'm afraid it's not as simple as that!" Okay, Semitic verbs have their own peculiarities, but the tenses, which cause so much trouble in Latin or French, couldn't be simpler. In fact, you can hardly call them tenses at all:

1. THE PERFECTIVE applies to finished action whether today or yesterday. You can add some sort of adverb to make the time clear:

"I've come back from London yesterday...I've just seen the mayor."

2. THE IMPERFECTIVE applies to unfinished or continuing action. Again, you need the whole context to establish if past, present or future:

"I'm going to London tomorrow....He keeps on seeing the mayor... He was just going to catch the train..."

Hebrew and other Semitic languages manage perfectly well with just the two forms: indeed, in Hebrew they are so afraid of being repetitive with them that you have to alternate one with the other to make good prose.

In GE'EZ the form that is considered PERFECTIVE is the "suffix conjugation" with a pronoun suffix placed on the end of the verb word. The IMPERFECTIVE is the "prefix conjugation", which as the name suggests employs a prefix.

Let's give an example.

The root of the verb "to speak" is **N.G.R.** In its simplest form,

ነ ገ ረ

we read **nagara** or **nägärä**, which is "he spoke/he has spoken" in the "suffix conjugation". The form **nagara** will be listed in the dictionary.

However, in the "prefix conjugation" the third person sing. masc. form is yenger,

ይ ን ግ ር :

"he is speaking/saying",etc.

Here is the paradigm of the "prefix conjugation": notice that tenger stands for both "you,sing. masc. are speaking" and "she

@@

is speaking". In practice, very little confusion would take place!

1st person sing.	'enger	I am speaking,etc.
2nd sing. masc.	tenger	You are speaking
2nd sing. fem.	tengerî	"
3rd sing. masc.	yenger	He is speaking
3rd sing. fem.	tenger	She is speaking
1st person pl.	nenger	We are speaking, etc.
2nd pl. masc.	tengerû	You are speaking
2nd pl. fem.	tengerâ	"
3rd pl. masc.	yengerû	They are speaking
3rd pl. fem.	yengerâ	"

With all these neutral E's [ə], the pronunciation would be quite close and tight.

There are irregular verbs, of course, but this pattern will apply in very many cases.

Here is the "suffix conjugation":

1st person sing.	nagarkû	I spoke
2nd sing. masc.	nagarkâ	You spoke
2nd sing. fem.	nagarkî	"
3rd sing. masc.	nagara	He spoke
3rd sing. fem.	nagarat	She spoke
1st person pl.	nagarna	We spoke
2nd pl. masc.	nagarkemmû	You spoke
2nd pl. fem.	nagarken	"
3rd pl. masc.	nagarû	They spoke
3rd pl. fem.	nagarâ	"

əə

CHAPTER SEVEN
A WORD ON TIGRÉ

As we have seen, the languages which most closely represent the modern forms of Ge'ez are Tigrè and Tigrinya, which belong largely to an area in the neighbouring Republic of Eritrea and a northern border zone. TIGRE and TIGRINYA are supposed to be alike: they apparently have the same name, and I'm not sure why. Tigrinya, spoken north and east of the City of Gondar, and down the eastern escarpment hanging in mists over the Afar-Danakil country, is supposed to contain not only a notable number of Semitic gutturals but "African clicks"connecting it to Khoi-San-Bushman-Hottentot languages of Southern Africa ("harde klank" in Kramers: this I doubt: it may be a reference to some percussive, occlusive or aspirate quality of the consonants?). The source for TIGRE, which is used north of the TIGRINYA country on the Red Sea coast and in the hill country of Eritrea, is Manfredo Camperio, **Manuale Pratico della Lingua Tigrè**, Hoepli, Milan, 1936. It suffers from a puzzling vagueness in its orthography - Tigrè sometimes appears in Ethiopic script, but is chiefly oral, and Camperio's system **is sui generis**. In what follows, we presume the sounds are as in Italian (e.g. **ch** = [k]) except for **ö**, which seems to represent the neutral vowel [ə].

PRONOUNS:

1st person sing.	**ana**	"I"	1st plural	**hénna**	"we"
2nd sing. masc.	**enta**	"you"	2nd pl. masc.	**öntu**	"you"
2nd sing. fem.	**enti**	"you"	2nd pl. fem.	**öntön**	"you"
3rd sing. masc.	**hötu**	"he"	3rd pl. masc.	**höntom**	"they"
3rd sing. fem.	**höta**	"she"	3rd pl. fem.	**hötem**	"they"

THE VERB "TO HAVE"

Notice how the verb comes last in the sentence:

uoro chitab bi-e	I have a book.
uoro chitab bö-ca	You (sing. masc.) have a book.
uoro chitab be-chi	You (sing. fem.) have a book.
uoro chitab bu	He has a book.
uoro chitab ba	She has a book.
uoro chitab be-na	We have a book.
uoro chitab be-cum	You (masc. pl.) have a book.
uoro chitab be-chin	You (pl. fem.) have a book.
uoro chitab bom	They (masc.) have a book.
uoro chitab ben	They (fem.) have a book.

The indefinite article with **bēt**, house, appears to be **hatte**; the past tense "I had a house", etc. are quite different:

hatte bēt álet-öllu	He had a house
hatte bēt el-la	She had a house, etc.

@@@
@@@

@@@

THE VERB "TO BE": This is not very well explained: which sense of "to be" is implied, to exist, to be in a place, the copula? There are such forms as:

hötu halla tu	He is
hōta hallet tu	She is
ihallena	We are not
alco	I was
alca	You (sing. masc.) were
iállet	She wasn't

In a respectably Semitic way, possessive pronouns are tacked onto the end of the noun: **chitabié** (my book); **chitabcá** (your book); **chitabù** (his book); **chitabna** (our book); and so on. It is not surprisingly to find Arabic words borrowed freely among a people living opposite Mecca who often use Arabic as a written medium.

FEMININE NOUNS can be made by the addition of a final -t (with or without other changes):

adök	donkey,ass	**edghet**	she-ass, female donkey
cöleb	dog	**cölbet**	bitch
cadma	serving-man	**cadmaiet**	serving-woman
mamba	lord, master	**mambait**	lady, mistress

PLURALS as in Ge'ez can be strangely formed:

singular		plural	
negus	king	**negüs**	
mähör	foal, colt	**amhur**	
hagai	spring	**airahat**	
nebi	prophet	**nabiat**	
beghät	sheep	**avâghe**	
mäs, amus	skin, hide	**garbet**	
hog	foot	**hanag**	feet
ezen	ear	**ésenz**	
anöf	nose	**anfotat**	

TIGRÉ is certainly a language that would reward further study, and a key to understanding Ethiopic/Eritrean cultures.

@@@

@@
@@

CHAPTER EIGHT
AMARNYA, OR, AMHARIC:
WHAT IT'S LIKE AND WHAT IT'S FROM

Amharic is the main language of the central highlands of Ethiopia and is official for the Ethiopian state: we can date this importance to the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty in 1270. Up to that time, Ethiopian history is about as obscure as that of Scotland up to the reign of Macbeth, and Ge'ez, the Latin of Ethiopia, was preserved and used from when this "Dark Age" began, in about 800 A.D., to the present day. From about 1270 on the language of the court was Amharic, and thus it gradually gained in status: when the military camp at the site of Addis Ababa in the old Kingdom of Shoa was chosen as the new capital, and Australian gum trees planted around it, Amharic replaced Ge'ez entirely in administration, though full of Ge'ez words and phrases.

It is still claimed that Amharic is a Semitic language. Well, I suppose it is, but knowing this classification is not much help. Ullendorff describes it as "this difficult, yet most rewarding, language" and also mentions the "Turanisation" of the sentence structure: meaning that it's a difficult word-order, like Turkish. English is used to placing the adjective before the noun, but in Amharic every subordinate idea and qualifying word has to be placed first, and the verb is saved to the very end of the sentence. Edward Ullendorff in the **Amharic Chestomathy** quotes a message in "English" left in his hotel: the word-order is that of Amharic:

> "The previously party at 8 o'clock having been fixed at 8.30 taking place saying they telephoned for you."

In the Alone-Stokes **Manual of the Amharic Language** the sample sentence is somwhat easier:

> "At-ford water as-it-abounded by-bridge road we-came."

or: "As the water was too high for us at the ford, we came by the bridge road," or, in Amharic:

በመልካ፡ ወኃ፡ በዛብንና፡ በድልዴ፡
መንገድ፡ መጣነ።

Bämälkā wihâ bäzâbninâ bädildî mängäd mäṭânä

At this point, we should remind readers to have no stress, but "lift the voice slightly at the end of the word, and to pronounce the very

@@

"fronted" ä and the "uh" or dough-in-mouth sound of â. Here is an easier phrase from Mangestu Lemma, the piece **Nine Travellers** quoted in the Chrestomathy:

በጐንደር፡ ነበሩ፡ ተጫዋች፡ ጐንዳሬ፡

bäGondär näbäru tätyâwâch Gondärê..

"In Gondar there was an entertaining Gondaré..." (For the story you must consult the Chrestomathy! p.76).

Here is another one, from Alone-Stokes, page 54:

Bäkätämâ gäbsinnâ sâr âitäfâm, bämängädu gin bäwihâ âtägäb

kâlläw sâr bäqär lêlâ âiggagngnim.

"In-town barley-and grass will-not-be-wanting, on-the-road however at-water (bäwihâ) beside than-that-which-is (kâlläw) grass (sâr) except other will-not-be-found."

"In the towns there will be lots of barley and grass, but along the road there's nothing except the grass that grows next to water."

Notice the "postpositions", "beside" and "except": they are like prepositions, but come after the noun (perhaps to supplement bä- etc.)

So, where does Amharic come from? Edward Ullendorff assigns its peculiarities to a "Cushite substrate", that is, the lingering influence of the languages originally spoken in the region. Another writer (I forget who) claims that the BEJA language of the eastern part of Sudan and parts of Eritrea has a structure just like that of Amharic. From my own forays into Afaraf (DANAKIL) and Somali I know that "Cush" languages can have very odd structures indeed. But the jury is out: the languages of Cush are very diverse and very little documented. Besides which, the "substrate" theory isn't convincing: the world is full of people bilingual in two diverse languages: an educated Ethiopian will have mastered two very strange ones, Amharic and English, besides any local language the authorities would rather not know about. In my recent Second Book of Creole I failed to find some golden rule for the effect of one language on another. It is difficult explaining the oddness of Amharic or English or Welsh or Malagasy or Ngambai from a "mixed origin" theory, and I won't attempt to do so. We trust that the Amharas were fruitful enough in their own plateaux to devise a language of great interest and quaint charm.

@@

CHAPTER NINE
THE ARTICLE, THE NOUN, THE ADJECTIVE, THE NUMBER

Amharic does not use the indefinite article "a/an" but has adopted a definite article, "the", which is attached to the end of the noun. If an adjective and a noun come together, it is attached to the adjective instead.

	SINGULAR	PLURAL
MASCULINE NOUN:	-u	-u
FEMININE NOUN:	-îtu, -wâ	-u

Examples: **bêt**, a house; **bêtu**, the house: **sêt**, a woman; **sêtîtu**, the woman: **bêtóch**, houses; **bêtóchu**, the houses: **sêtóch**, women; **sêtóchu**, the women; **tilliqu färäs**, the big horse.

To form the PLURAL of the noun, Amharic mostly uses the very commonly repeated ending -óch: the constant "och" "och" "och", with the "ch" as in English "chUrch", and a bit of "lift" at the end of a word, is a way of identifying the speech:

SINGULAR		PLURAL	
lij	child	**lijjoch**	children
âshkär	servant	**âshkäroch**	servants
bâryâ	slave	**bâroch**	slaves
wushshâ	dog	**wushshoch**	dogs

Notice that a one-syllable word likes to double the final consonant when anything is added, and that some words make small changes to produce the plural to avoid awkward combinations of sounds.

There are two GENDERS in Amharic, MASCULINE and FEMININE: a -t often lurks about the feminine form, but with many words you just have to know which it is. Moon, Stars, Earth are "she" in Amharic, as well as countries and towns as generally in Latin. In a Bantu language Trees and Plants would form a "class" by themselves, but in Amharic are accommodated under feminine gender. God and the Angels and some of the Stars are called "he" in Amharic.

ARE THERE CASE-ENDINGS IN AMHARIC? Well, not really, except for the accusative, where -n or -in is added, coincidentally as in Esperanto. The accusative is the object of the sentence, not anything else generally.
What you might call the genitive case is had by prefixing yä-,

@@

@@@

"of", but note that the "of" word comes first in a possessive construction:

የኢትዮጵያ፡ ቋንቋዎች።

yä-Ityupiyâ qwânqwâwóch

the languages of Ethiopia

(Compare the reverse construction in Ge'ez: **lisâna Nigush**, the language of the King = Amharic).

What one might call the dative case is had by using the Semitic preposition prefixes:

lä- to, for, etc.

kä- from, with, etc.

bä- in, with, on, etc.

Again, Amharic likes to put these prepositional nouns first, which has led to the habit of refining the meaning of the prefix by adding a postposition after the noun as well:

färäsóch kä-bäqilóch gâr

horses together with mules

The three preposition prefixes can be very general in meaning from the point of view of the more precise prepositioning in English: a prudent use of the context is useful to give a good and fluent translation.

ADJECTIVES are treated rather like nouns, especially when they stand alone, as in "the good" (masculine plural). However, you don't have to use a plural adjective where the noun is clearly plural already, and you don't have to use a feminine form unless the noun doesn't tell you this: the feminine form uses **-îtu** and the plural of course uses **-óch**.

You add the definite article, accusative ending -n, -in, the preposition prefixes **lä-**, **kä-**, **bä-** and the prefix **yä-** to the adjective in front of the noun or where idiom demands it.

In true African and Semitic style you don't have special COMPARATIVE or SUPERLATIVE forms of the adjective ("good- better-best; nice-nicer-nicest"), you just use **kä-** with the meaning of "than", or even **kä-hullu**, "than all".

ƏƏ

Joseph Biddulph

TONGUES OF PRESTER JOHN:

AN OVERVIEW OF GEʿEZ (CLASSICAL ETHIOPIC) AND AMHARIC

Cyhoeddwr JOSEPH BIDDULPH Publisher
32 Strŷd Ebeneser
PONTYPRIDD CF37 5PB
CYMRU — WALES

2000 A.D.

ISBN 1 897999 29 1